"Something in the Water:  Hugh Gulland and

His Pen-Pal:  Freakwater's Janet Bean"

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"We tell people we met in the women's penitentiary," claims   
Janet Bean of her songwriting partnership with co-vocalist   
Catherine Irwin. For the record, this Cell-Block H version of

Freakwater's biography is pure fantasy; their only prison

being one of small-town boredom in Dullsville, Kentucky

when they first got together way back when, to employ their under-used vocal talents on some country songs.  
  
A decade-plus later, abetted by long-time  
Freakwater bassist David Wayne Gay and a roster of  
other collaborators, Janet and Catherine are tugging  
the heartstrings of an ever-growing audience with  
their bittersweet country-folk duets, as demonstrated  
most recently on the End Time album (Thrill Jockey).  
Perhaps their most assured excursion yet, this last  
release sees those aching vocal harmonies enhanced  
with slide, banjo and some lush string arrangements,  
painting Freakwater's tales of loss and regret with rich  
autumn colours.  
  
Having missed the chance of a face-to-face chat  
with the Walkman on hand, Janet rashly consented  
to interview by e-mail, thus opening up her working  
days to a battery of disruption over a number of  
weeks courtesy of BoB. Here's a distillation, with a  
few appendants to try to add a bit of context where  
necessary.  
  
**On multi-banding and creative fulfilment  
(Janet's other long-standing musical  
involvement is as drummer with Eleventh  
Dream Day).**  
  
Well, I am not remembering so much tuneful singing  
on my part in EDD. In the studio I suppose I was  
given a few shots at singing, but live singing behind  
the drums is not so easy.  Over the years it became  
easier and better - or at least I hope so - but still  
today I would rather sing playing no instruments so  
that I can concentrate fully on the song.  
  
I think early on I would have said that Freakwater  
was perhaps a more creative outlet for me, but now I  
think I have found a way to get the most out of both.  
I adore playing the drums and if I don't get to do it  
for a long time it is truly a big void, and I want to hit  
stuff. So it's best If I get to play the drums. As far as  
the two projects conflicting, the verdict is still out. At  
first I did not think so. Musically I don't think they  
conflict in the least, but the time each band requires  
was a problem, and EDD lost out more often than  
not, Looking back I realise this, but Tortoise (EDD  
bassist Doug McComb's other band) was also gaining  
momentum so it was difficult to find time for all of us  
to be together. Rick (Rizzo, EDD frontman and Janet's  
husband) is the one who suffered the most from it all  
and I am very sorry for that.  
  
**There's a detectable element of melancholia  
or world-weariness in Freakwater's music. Can  
you comment on this?**  
  
If I had any sense it would be through. That's not in  
response to your interview, but in regard to my  
anguish.  You see the reason I keep going is because  
when somebody really does me wrong I can stealthily  
reveal the true horror they have perpetrated against  
me, or me against them, without too much damage.  
Then I feel all better.  To tell ya the truth I usually only  
give myself a hard time. My songs are little lessons to  
myself and if I sing them enough maybe I will learn the  
little lessons.  I am a very sick person. Did you hear the  
joke about how do you get an artist off of your front  
porch? You tip him for the pizza.  
  
**So who's done you wrong and can you tell me  
more about what you mean by sick?**  
  
Okay do you want names? Where do I start, maybe  
with Warren Beatty; then there is Johnny Depp, Iggy  
Pop, Bill Clinton, Clint Eastwood, Johnny Paycheck. . .  
they all broke my heart. Loved me and then left me.  
  
In regard to your question of sickness. I suppose  
in the continuum of sickness I fall within its  
parameters. I guess. For the most part I have grown  
accustomed to my quirks and I would hate to see  
them go for good.  
  
I truly don't know how (my quirks) affect what I  
do (musically), and if I could explain what I do and  
why I do it then I wouldn't have any excuses left for  
my troubling behaviours.You can't claim psychosis if  
you have a clear notion of what you're up to. I just  
love to sing. I really love to just sing. I sing all the time,  
in the car, in the shower, doing the dishes. It drives my  
son a little crazy. I write in bursts. I won't write  
anything for almost a year and then I will have a mad  
rush of ideas and come up with five or six tunes. Five  
or six is a lot for me, but I have been lucky enough  
to not have been the main writer. My dream is to be  
a back-up singer for a funky soul review. I could wear  
a long gown, wear my hair up, and do that back and  
forth stepping thing that back-up singers all know  
how to do.  
  
Kiddie Altamont ?  
Oh my I had a nutty Sunday I performed with Jon  
Langford (Mekons) at a concert for children. Jon had  
them in the palm of his hand with fabulous Burl Ives'  
tunes and other kiddie sing-along classics. I, on the  
other hand, felt like I was at Kiddie Altamont. Cups  
were flying, children were running across the stage,  
and the din was a force to be reckoned with. I was  
up there singing as slow as molasses, performing  
songs about children dying of various things such as  
leukemia and snake bites. I don't know what the hell  
I was thinking. If you are ever asked to sing songs for  
kids I suggest not doing As Tears Go By; although I felt  
I did a pretty good version of it. It was kind of eerie.  
As I sang the lines about wanting to hear the  
children sing and the rain coming down, it was all  
coming true right before my eyes. I made enough  
cash to take my family out for dinner so all turned  
out well.  
  
**Finally, some thoughts on combining music,  
family life, and the day gig.**  
  
I think of playing music as a privilege. I am exceedingly  
lucky to be able to get past what it is that makes  
people think they can not, or do not have what it  
takes. I don't mean what it takes to play a show, but  
what it takes to just pick up a guitar and write a song,  
or even sing a song just to make doing chores a little  
more enjoyable. I certainly don't feel that I am owed a  
standard of living that is reasonable for this luck, or  
talent, or whatever you want to call it. Sure, I would  
rather not work at a desk everyday and for most of  
my life I have not had to. If I toured much more than I  
do, and put much more effort into selling records than  
I do, then maybe I wouldn't have to come to this job  
everyday, but I wouldn't be home with my son. Being  
around my son is what makes me happy. Besides, I find  
that the more you take part in the world around you  
- the everyday world that most deal with - the more  
you discover very kind and interesting people that  
have interesting stories.  
  
*End Time* is available now on Thrill Jockey, who have  
also released Eleventh Dream Day's latest, *The Stalled  
Parade.*